

**Royal Commission into Family Violence
Casey North Community Information & Support Service Inc.**

Improving our Response to Family Violence

This submission provides information on the issues and presenting demand that our organisation is currently experiencing that relate to family violence. It also provides information on a program model that we have designed specifically to respond to the high incidence of family breakdown and family violence in the community that we assist.

Casey North Community Information & Support Service (CNCISS) provides a range of support programs and community resources to residents in the City of Casey and neighbouring municipalities. In particular services and programs have been developed to assist the disadvantaged and those presenting in crisis.

All of the programs that we deliver at CNCISS work together to provide the best possible response to the community. Each month the service receives over 1,000 contacts from people seeking community information and support services.

Statistics collected by Victoria Police indicate that the City of Casey has the highest number of family violence reports and applications for intervention orders in Melbourne (3,752 reports: 2013-2014). Since commencing in 1997, the number of clients presenting to our organisation as a result of family breakdown and/or family violence has been particularly high and of concern to us. Many clients present to our organisation for assistance and support after they have endured the stress of a family breakdown and are seeking support to overcome their crisis and stabilise their situation. Family Breakdown has also been identified by Local Government as a significant issue and cause for concern for this municipality.

To respond to this alarming problem, CNCISS provides a number of support programs and resources that may assist clients dealing with the crisis of family breakdown and/or violence. These include Emergency Relief, Social work support, crisis counselling, financial counselling and advocacy and referral information.

However, as a more responsive approach CNCISS has developed a primary prevention model that aims to provide participants with improved relationship skills and foster respectful relationships. The objective of this program is to assist participants develop the skills and strategies necessary to deal with the pressures that are placed on relationships and where possible avoid the tragedy of family breakdown and in some cases family violence.

The name of the program is Keeping It Together.

A well planned course consisting of 8 workshops has been designed and offered to participants that identify their relationships at risk of breakdown or at risk of family violence. The program is unique in that it adopts a preventative approach to support

women and families avoid and/or overcome the issues that are known to lead to family breakdown and violence. A key component of this program is the promotion of respectful relationships within the family.

The workshops run for approximately 2 ½ hours and locations are varied across the community to improve access for participants. Each week of the 8 week course is quite structured with the aim of assisting the participants to learn the skills to help them 'Keep It Together' whether this be their relationships or just themselves. The workshops are planned weekly as follows;

- Healthy Communication
- Assertiveness strategies
- Positive conflict resolution
- Understanding and coping with anger x 2 weeks
- Improved self esteem
- Financial literacy and capability (delivered by a qualified financial counsellor)
- Self-care

CNCISS recognises that financial pressure experienced by many households in Casey is one of the largest contributors to family breakdown and family violence. The inclusion of the Financial Literacy component provides an additional opportunity for participants to improve skills and knowledge in this area.

The program was first introduced/piloted in 2008. At the time it consisted of 6 workshops and with limited funding from philanthropy a part time facilitator was appointed. Drawing on two studies, *Exploring Extreme Family Breakdown* (Clifford and Nickson, 2002) and *Towards Understanding the Reasons for Divorce* (Wolcott and Hughes, 1999), CNCISS initially designed this program to:

- help women identify the contributing factors that lead to family breakdown;
- address these factors before they resulted in emotional distress and family violence;
- assist in developing skills to overcome these issues.

The focus was on women for two reasons. Firstly, women have been identified as better monitors of marital stress and aware of problems earlier than men. Secondly, women have been socialised to reveal feelings more than men, and to be more comfortable seeking assistance without a loss of face. By providing women with the opportunity to improve their basic skills of communication, assertiveness, anger management and conflict resolution, whilst simultaneously enhancing their awareness of self-esteem issues and the importance of self-care, it was hoped to equip them with the skills necessary to deal with the personal, relationship and financial issues that place pressure on families and relationships.

Considerable research suggests that young children growing up in violent households are vulnerable to long-term effects from family violence. For example, children who witness violence are five times more likely to develop serious emotional and behavioural difficulties than those who have not experienced a violent household (Bostock, Plumpton and Pratt, 2009). Young children growing up in conflicted homes are often torn between a sense of

loyalty towards their family unit, and a desire for the violence to stop (Wolfe, 2005). In other words they do not want their parents to separate, but the stress of family conflict can result in long-term developmental and behavioural problems. By teaching young mothers the skills to communicate positively and assertively with their partners and other family members, we are potentially impacting positively on the long-term well-being of their children.

With research increasingly highlighting the fact that children and adolescents reflect the lessons learned in their family of origin through their behaviour (Wolfe, 2005), the Keeping It Together program represents a powerful tool for impacting positively on the lessons these children will learn. Where children are exposed to family conflict or family violence, in many cases the emotional and psychological harm from these events later emerges in the context of their own future relationships. In this way, family breakdown and violence can be passed down through the generations.

Social Isolation

Another significant issue that emerged was the experience of social isolation and loneliness, in particular for young mothers. It is apparent from many of these comments that social isolation is a contributing factor to relationship distress amongst women. By bringing together an eclectic group of women with diverse, yet fundamentally similar issues to address, the Keeping It Together program has demonstrated the power of social inclusion as a resource to prevent family and individual breakdown. This observation is supported by research findings that suggest increasing social capital can decrease the odds of domestic violence and neglectful or harsh parenting (Mental Health Weekly Digest, 2006). A high percentage of participants at the conclusion of the program indicated on the evaluation sheets provided, that they would be interested in follow up sessions. Reasons provided included a desire to continue with the personal growth they had experienced and also the need to combat social isolation.

In addition, responses from earlier groups indicated approximately 45% felt six weeks was not long enough, and 40% felt two hours per session was not long enough. All participants were invited to meet again 6-8 weeks after the completion of the original pilot program to provide feedback on how they were progressing, and most took up the offer. It was at one of these follow-up sessions that one participant disclosed that she and her two young children had now left the abusive family situation. Whilst the intention of the Keeping It Together program was initially to support and maintain family relationships, it is nevertheless necessary to acknowledge that some relationships cannot be saved if the woman and her children are to survive emotionally and physically. When this is the case, it is important that a woman have the skills, support and self-confidence necessary to cope with the family breakdown or violence.

Interestingly, both during and after the course many participants chose to contact each other independently in these cases, the 6-week course acted as a catalyst to promote further social interactions.

However, a later review conducted with participants around 12 months after they had completed the program provided much different results. At this time it was proposed to provide a short refresher course and for those that were interested, an advanced program.

Given the feedback from participants at the end of each course we thought this would attract a high rate of attendance. We were surprised to find that the response to this was almost 100% that all participants did not feel the need for either a refresher or an advanced program. They were all very happy with the original program and felt that they had gained enough skills and confidence to improve their relationships and/or home situation and also social networks.

Flow on effect to extended family

There has also been a flow on effect to extended family members and wider community members identified through the feedback from participants. Each week comprehensive 'hand outs' are provided. Several participants have described improved communication with their partners because they sat down and discussed the handouts together. Others met regularly with friends to discuss the information and another conveyed what she had learned to her church group each week. As well as this flow on effect, children were also able to witness the positive change in the way their parents communicated and more than one participant shared the fact that she had also recognised this flow on effect to her children.

"The positive changes that I am going through, I can actually see in my children."

The benefits of focussing primary prevention on women and the influence that women can introduce to partners and children is discussed in VicHealth (2007). It is suggested that educating women can assist in changing men's attitudes and in adopting non-violent practices. It is also acknowledged that women play an important role as parents in socialising children.

All of these outcomes had been anticipated by CNCISS during the development of the program, however we were not sure that we would be able to prove them and we were delighted when the supporting feedback was provided by participants.

CALD

The program also diversifies the modules to include women from CALD communities, which requires a higher level of sensitivity and time. The VicHealth (2007) report found that there is conflicting evidence as to whether violence against women is more common in CALD communities. However, there is certainly evidence to suggest that the stigma attached to family violence is much higher in CALD communities and is even accepted by the men in some communities.

What we found is that there are certainly more complexities for women from CALD backgrounds. Women are afraid of being ostracised from their family and community if they take any action to protect themselves or their children. Women from a CALD background and who are exposed to family violence face additional complex challenges when seeking assistance and support upon leaving unhealthy relationships. Some of these barriers include accessing support when English is not your first language. Accessing information with the use of interpreters, for some women this is an added complication as they be reluctant to disclose that information, they may be comprised in terms of privacy and confidentiality.

Another barrier to seeking help and support is that they may be fearful of reprisals from both their family here in Australia and from their country of origin. Particularly when the families have arranged the marriage and as a consequence by disclosing, the women is bringing dishonour and shame to both families. So culturally there are many factors that prevent women from a CALD background from disclosing.

Other challenges include issues with their visa status with the Department of Immigration & Border Protection. Some women who have been sponsored by their partner here are very vulnerable as they have little support legally, economically, socially and are dependent upon their partner. This can prohibit the survivor of family violence from seeking any assistance based on a well-founded fear of possible deportation if her partner threatens to call the Department. This may also prevent women from approaching other legal services, support services and the police if she were to obtain an intervention order.

Cross cultural awareness, training and case coordination has proven to be most beneficial when working with survivors of family violence. The program provides additional specific supports that assist and inform women who are from a CALD background.

Review & Changes to program

Since the commencement of this program several reviews have been conducted and the course has been adjusted/improved to respond better to the needs of the participants. In addition the scope of the program has been broadened in recognition that it is meeting not only the needs of the original target group but also women at different stages of family breakdown/violence/conflict.

The groups began with a very broad mandate:

- locate women residing in the City of Casey, and at risk of family breakdown;
- provide information to these women to increase their awareness and understanding of the prevalence, patterns and causes of unhealthy relationships;
- educate them in the skills necessary to deal with the issues placing pressure on relationships.

Based on this description, we initially envisaged a target audience consisting primarily of women in an existing relationship who had detected problems in that relationship. Many participants did join the groups for that reason, citing problems that ranged from a general inability to communicate, to verbal, emotional, financial or physical abuse. Where young children were involved, there was often a sense of social isolation involved. These women were hoping to improve their interpersonal skills to maintain or improve the relationship, as well as alleviate feelings of loneliness. Written feedback suggests this was achieved. For example:

“This course has given me the strength to make my life better. I will really miss coming”;
“I feel more empowered by our discussions and I really look forward to coming”.

However, some additional and unexpected themes have also emerged. These themes, which still reflected family relationship issues, and were thus in keeping with our mandate, were:

- Women who had recently left a relationship and wished to improve their interpersonal skills in order to communicate effectively with their ex-partner over their children's welfare. Feedback from one such participant summed this up:

"This was very helpful for me after just separating from my partner. Everything was just what I needed for my situation".

- Women seeking to improve communication and conflict resolution with their teenage or adult children. Often conflict over children was undermining the parents' relationship.
- Women wishing to improve their interpersonal skills and self-esteem before entering a new relationship.

Comments on evaluation forms have indicated that participants gained what they expected, and often more than they anticipated from the groups. For example:

"Great to be able to share stories with each other, I'm glad I came";

"I have enjoyed the class, it's given me the opportunity to share, compare and challenge my experiences with everyone";

"I found the support and education very positive and";

"I didn't think I'd enjoy it, but I made friends and feel more confident".

Since commencement the program has been increased from 6 weeks to 8 weeks and the sessions increased from 2 hours to 2½. This extension was firstly to expand the module dealing with anger and secondly to include the Financial Literacy and Capability workshop (which is another program provided by CNCISS). At the beginning of each subsequent week, a short time is spent reviewing the previous weeks topic and how participants have introduced the new learning into their relationships, this necessitated the additional half hour to each session, however it was not enough time to deal with the 'anger' module and hence that was increased to 2 weeks.

The inclusion of the Financial Literacy workshop, Stay on Track was considered was considered a most appropriate inclusion given that financial distress is one of the largest contributors to relationship problems. This workshop provides valuable information and is tailored to the demographic of the group. This program was the recipient of a National Award in 2012 and more importantly it has been well received by participants.

Community response

Local agencies have welcomed the Keeping It Together initiative and we regularly receive requests to be placed on mailing lists for notification of upcoming courses. In particular, Casey Enhanced Maternal and Child Health workers have referred many young mothers identified as socially isolated, struggling financially and emotionally, and keen to maintain their family intact.

Referrals have also been received from several local counselling agencies and other support services as well as in house referrals from programs at CNCISS. These referrals accounted for

many of the older participants, and reflected their need to adapt to changing family dynamics as their children reached adolescence and young adulthood. These older children had often grown up in a non-communicative or conflicted family environment and were now starting to demonstrate those learned behaviours both within their family home and in their own interpersonal relationships. Many of the older mothers described unspoken family “rules” that enabled family conflict and violence to continue unchallenged for many years. Adolescence and the child’s need for independence was often the catalyst for destructive rebellion, and even violence. The older mothers provided tangible proof to the younger mothers that children are inevitably affected by family conflict at all stages of their life. A recent participant provided the following feedback:

“The whole course was fantastic, and linked with my psychologist visits. She has noticed a big improvement in my assertiveness and self-confidence.”

Group leadership

The groups are run by facilitators with professional qualifications in social and community work. This has proved to be invaluable, given the number of participants disclosing issues beyond their presenting reasons for inclusion in the group. Family conflict can both cause, and result from, emotional disorders such as anxiety, depression and other more complex diagnoses.

In addition, where participants disclose having grown up in abusive family of origins, unpredictable responses in both themselves and other participants can result. For this reason, it is important that the leader remains alert to, and professionally able to deal with, potentially damaging reactions and for this reason also the groups have been kept to a maximum of 8 participants. This may also result in a referral to appropriate services for ongoing assistance. The Keeping It Together program does not exist in isolation – participants can be linked in to other programmes at Casey North CISS, including counselling, financial counselling, social work and emergency relief as appropriate.

Challenges

Attracting women to attend a group aimed at improving relationship skills and encouraging respectful relationships can be challenging. Marketing and promotion needs to be carefully considered. There is a stigma attached to the notion of family breakdown and family violence that many do not want to admit, even if they are at risk. In our experience, a large percentage of women are not going to attend a program that is promoted as reducing/avoiding family violence.

Women who have experienced family violence often feel stigmatised along with a sense of shame, leading to a high incidence of women not reporting family violence and often blaming themselves for the breakdown of the relationship. Women who have been psychologically, physically, sexually, socially and financially abused in a relationship or fear that leaving will escalate the abuse may not report or even identify the existence of the abuse. In the light of an overburdened system and the fear associated with reporting family violence and possibly not being believed, women will often minimise the abuse, often believing that other reported violence is much worse than their own experiences.

To overcome this we have focussed marketing and promotion on respectful relationships and women caring about themselves. An information session has also been introduced prior to the beginning of each program. This allows the women to come and gather more information and meet the facilitators and other participants, without making a commitment to a whole 8 week program. This approach has proven to be successful.

The KIT program is designed to welcome women who have experienced family violence without feeling stigmatised by attending a specific family violence group, which many of our participants would not have considered. The group primarily offers a program of self-development, conflict resolution, assertiveness, self-esteem, communication, anger and self-care while allowing women to identify any abuse in their situations at their own pace in a safe, supportive environment.

The biggest challenge of all for us has been the location of funding to keep this program running. Since 2008 the program has continued to run on the generosity of philanthropy and has been at risk or discontinuation due to lack of funding on a few occasions. However, this program has been enormously successful and we are very reluctant for it to stop.

Conclusion

The model has proven to be extremely successful and the feedback from participants and local community support providers referring clients has been overwhelmingly positive. In general when promoting the program it is received extremely well. There have been occasions however when workers focussed on the support needs of family violence victims have not seen the benefits of such a primary prevention program, as they cannot see the benefit of introducing such change to the family dynamics. To date over 200 women have participated in this program.

The Keeping It Together program has become a popular and viable tool for improving the well-being of women. It is free of charge and venues are accessible by public transport where required. The weekly topics – communication, assertiveness, conflict resolution, anger management, self-esteem and self-care – are in line with the recommendations for improving family relationships as identified in the studies by Clifford and Nickson (2002) and Wolcott and Hughes (1999). The inclusion of the financial literacy module responds to the need that we are seeing at our centre.

There is an increasing emphasis on recognising social connectedness, positive self-esteem and self-care as the building blocks of assertive interpersonal skills. Most participants admitted to feelings of low self-esteem as the driving force behind their lack of assertiveness, their willingness to accept all forms of abuse, and their inability to better their family situation. Social isolation, low self-esteem and family violence are often the result of a complex interaction between the individual, the family (including the family of origin), the community and society as a whole.

“I have realised that I am worth it!”

Abuse within a relationship can take many forms beyond the physical abuse traditionally associated with family violence. It can manifest as emotional abuse and intimidation, isolation from others, financial control and verbal threats against the woman, her children, other family members and even family pets (Bostock et al. 2009). Many of the participants in the Keeping It Together program disclosed living under some or all of these conditions. Many were also unaware that the conditions they described were forms of domestic violence. In the words of one participant:

"Each week gave me something to really think about in relation to my own life that you can't always see for yourself".

This program provided them with a safe environment in which to learn the components of a healthy relationship, and just as importantly, the components of an unhealthy relationship. In many cases, it also gave them the confidence and the tools to address the inequality of their situation and break the generational cycle of abuse.

Domestic abuse remains a complex issue, with contributing factors including alcohol and substance abuse, race/ethnicity, mental disorders and socioeconomic status (Mears, 2003). Participation in the Keeping It Together program does not guarantee prevention, but it does start the process of individual and community awareness about what is not acceptable family behaviour and the importance of reducing of social isolation.

The Keeping It Together model will obviously not solve all problems associated with Family Violence, but so far it has assisted 100s of families and women to improve their situation. The program has been successful in assisting couples to weather the pressures that have caused relationship stress. In some cases this may have been as basic as getting communication happening again between family members and others may have required more intensive strategies and this has been achieved by improved confidence, communication skills, assertiveness and awareness by the women that have participated in the program. In these cases the social return on the program is invaluable.

"There is a wealth of practice knowledge, experience and evidence indicating that such interventions are both viable and acceptable. Given the significant economic costs associated with violence against women, such effects are also likely to reap savings for individuals, businesses and governments."

VicHealth (2007)

For other women the program has been the catalyst for enabling them to deal with an unacceptable situation such as family violence, by providing confidence, empowerment and awareness. Linkages and referrals to necessary supports and information is a key component for these women.

At present we are planning to expand the program to reach further as the growth corridor expands across the Shire of Cardinia. Another longer term plan is to develop the program further to include groups for men. It would be reasonably easy to adapt the modules to suit a men's group dealing with similar issues and there has been some demand demonstrated by men for such a resource in our community.

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